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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine the effects of mildly self-disparaging humor on audiences' perceptions when it is used by speakers perceived to be of differing credibility (ethos) levels. Responses by 27 students who were potential subjects of the experiment were used to construct a credibility scale. The most credible speaker, a university psychologist, and the speaker of average credibility, a high school senior intending to major in psychology, were the ostensible speakers used in the study. A speech used in an earlier experiment was modified to yield four different conditions: (1) high ethos/humor, (2) low ethos/humor, (3) high ethos/no humor, and (4) low ethos/no humor. Subjects, students in a speech course, were told that the speeches were designed to enlighten students about majoring in psychology and had been broadcast on the radio in Atlanta. Approximately 25 useable responses resulted for each condition. Subjects rated the speeches according to measures included to reinforce the study's "cover story," as well as on James C. McCroskey's differential ethos scale and Holly Stocking and Dolf Zillman's seven-step scales. Results indicated that the ethos manipulation worked only for the "authoritativeness" factor and that the hypothesis that speakers using mildly self-disparaging humor would be rated higher on "sense of humor" and "wittiness" regardless of ethos level was correct. There was no interaction between humor and ethos. Although not significant, character and honesty scores did favor humorous speakers, indicating that text book writers' advice to use such humor is sound. (JL)

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SPEAKER ETHOS, SELF-DISPARAGING HUMOR, AND PERCEIVED "SENSE OF HUMOR"

a paper
presented at
the Third International
Conference on Humor, Washington,
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SPEAKER ETHOS, SELF-DISPARAGING HUMOR, AND PERCEIVED "SENSE OF HUMOR"

Most writers of speech textbooks recommend that speakers use humor for one reason or another. A small but growing number of experimental studies on the use of humor in public speeches[1] has indicated some general conclusions about the business. These include:

1. Adding a modicum of apt, subject-relevant humor to an otherwise straightforward persuasive speech does not seem to affect the speech's persuasiveness.
2. Adding a modicum of apt, subject-relevant humor to informative discourse is likely to result in higher ratings of the speaker's "character" factor of credibility.
3. Satire can result in either attitude change or strengthening, but only if auditors can perceive the serious message of the satire.
4. Humor that is irrelevant or inappropriate can damage a speaker's image or credibility.

Some textbook authors recommend specifically that the speaker use humor of a self-deprecating kind. For instance, Braden cautions speakers "to express good will toward listeners, showing appreciation for the listeners by deprecating yourself," and also advises: "Don't laugh at your own jokes--unless they are about yourself."[2] Weaver agrees with Braden:

> The function of tuning the audience may be served if the speaker can tell a funny story about himself. All of us have had embarrassing experiences where we have been placed in ludicrous positions, and a speaker who is willing to picture himself in such a position gives his listeners a chance to identify with him---and to be on his side, for we all love a good loser. He becomes to that degree a member of the in-group.[3]

The advice of these writers would seem sound from a common sense point of view. Using mild humorous self-disparagement would signal to an audience that the speaker has a sense of humor (which is a highly-valued characteristic), and also has a positive enough self-image to accept and make fun of personal weaknesses or mistakes. But whether a speaker benefits from mild humorous self-disparagement has been little-studied empirically.

Stocking and Zillman[4] tested for reactions to a male speaker telling disparaging stories. The speaker in their study told "stories" disparaging either himself, his friend, or his enemy. These stories showed the victim of them to be "bungling," to lack "sophistication," and to be unable "to control his profanity at home, to suppress a certain bodily function in public, and to conquer his girlfriend sexually." Stocking and Zillman tested for audience reaction with only 6 semantic differential-type scales.

A later study by Chang and Gruner[5] was conducted since, in the the Stocking and Zillman study, (1) the "stories" used were not typical of a more usual public speech, (2) the degree of disparagement (of self or other) was much greater than a public

speaker would generally heap on anyone (especially on oneself), and (3) the number of dependent measures used was small. The Chang/Gruner study used short persuasive speeches; these included (in the experimental condition) only mild humorous disparagement of the speaker's profession (which would be more usual for a speaker to do), and a larger number of dependent variable measures.

They exposed student Ss to mimeographed speeches attributed to either a university psychologist or university economist extolling the benefits of getting the Ph.D. in his field and then going on to a professional college teaching career in that discipline. Half the "economist" speeches and half the "psychologist" speeches contained jokes mildly "kidding" either economics or psychology, respectively.

Stocking and Zillman found that the humorous self-disparager hurt his "image;" the Chang/Gruner study did not. In fact, the latter study found that the speakers using mild humorous self-disparagement were generally rated higher on "funniness," "wittiness," and "good sense of humor" without adversely affecting the more important factors of their speaker credibility. However, the data indicated that a remark about marijuana made by the "economist" in the experimental condition may have triggered a student perception of him as more "authoritative" and "domineering."

Although the Chang/Gruner study tended to confirm what the textbook writers assert, it also raised a question. The "speakers" were of relatively high ethos (university professors). Is it possible that their high ethos allowed them to "get away with"

humorous self-disparagement, whereas a speaker with lower ethos (as, a student) might use such humor to the detriment of his/her ethos? Because of this question the present study was undertaken.

Procedures

Ethos Level. To establish initial ethos level of the "speakers," 27 students from the population of potential Ss ranked 7 persons as to their credibility in persuading them to major in psychology. The seven persons were: a university psychologist, a college senior majoring in psychology, a high school counselor or favorite teacher, a high school senior planning to major in psychology in college, your father or mother, your girl- or boy-friend, or an adult stranger met on public transportation. The difference between "a university psychologist" and "a high school senior from Atlanta planning to major in psychology in college" was just over 3½ ranks, on the average, so they were used as the "speakers" as being most plausible for the experiment and the speech used.

Stimulus. The "psychology" speech used in the earlier Chang/Gruner study served as the stimulus. This was a one-page dittoed speech attributed to either the high school senior or the university psychologist. The student speech was modified slightly to indicate his plans and aspirations rather than his accomplishments in the field of psychology. The humorous version of the speech contained the following humorous material:

> A woman entered the psychology building, looking for a psychologist to consult. In the hall she met a man.

'Are you a psychologist?' she asked. 'Why do you ask?' he replied. 'You're a psychologist!' she stated.

Which brings me to my favorite definition of a psychologist. That's a person who pulls habits out of rats. Or maybe you prefer another: A psychologist is a guy who would father a set of twins, get one of them baptized, and keep the other for a control.

Unfortunately, becoming a psychologist also classifies you, in some people's minds, with kooks like the nude encounter therapists, the EST freaks, the primal scream nuts, and various Freudian cuckoos. But then every family has a few skeletons in the closet.

Message Exposure. During Winter Quarter, 1981 speech instructors were given dittoed copies of the speeches in four different conditions: (1) high ethos/humor, (2) low ethos/humor, (3) high ethos/no humor, and (4) low ethos/no humor. Dependent variable measures were attached; these booklets were stacked 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, etc. so that they would randomly distribute themselves through the process of being handed out. The instructors had been trained to present the materials and to indoctrinate the Ss with the "cover story" that these were short speeches to enlighten college-bound students on majoring in psychology. The speeches were alleged to have been broadcast on radio in Atlanta, and this study was to determine their probable effectiveness. Of the usable responses, 26 were in the low ethos/no humor condition, 22 were in the low ethos/humor condition, 25 were in the high ethos/no humor

condition, and 25 were in the high ethos/humor condition.

Response Measures. The Ss rated the speech and speaker on several measures included to reinforce the "cover story" presented by the instructors. They also rated the speaker on the semantic differential ethos scales developed by McCroskey[6] and the 7-step scales used by Stocking and Zillman (witty/serious, confident/insecure, intelligent/stupid, malicious/kind, domineering/passive, and obnoxious/pleasant). All these scales were also used in the Chang/Gruner study.[7] All scale scores were subjected to a 2 x 2 factorial analysis of variance, which tests for the main effects of ethos level and the inclusion of humor, plus any interaction between these variables.

Results

Independent Variable Manipulation Validations. The ethos manipulation worked, but only for the "authoritativeness" factor. The mean rating for the psychologist was slightly but significantly higher than that for the high school senior, 5.17 to 4.73 ($F = 5.282$, $p < .024$). Inclusion of humor had no effect on authoritativeness means (4.96 and 4.93). Again, the ethos manipulation did not affect ratings of "character," but this finding makes "common sense." Brief exposure to a university psychologist and an unknown high school senior would be likely to draw ratings of higher authoritativeness for the former but not likely to influence perceptions of the two persons' "trustworthiness" or "likeableness."

Manipulation of the humor variable worked, also. The "funniness" means were 3.08 for the nonhumor speech and 4.35 for

the humor version ($F = 30.076$, $p < .0001$).

"Main" Results. The hypothesis of this study was that speakers using mildly self-disparaging humor would be rated higher on "sense of humor" and on "wittiness" regardless of ethos level. This hypothesis was confirmed.

The "sense of humor" means, on a 3-point scale, were 1.62 and 2.43 for the nonhumor and humor versions, respectively ($F = 33.976$, $p < .0001$). The "wittiness" means, on a 7-point scale, were 3.84 and 5.02 for the nonhumor and humor versions, respectively ($F = 25.098$, $p < .0001$). No other statistically significant differences in ratings were found in this study other than these and the IV manipulation validations. Likewise, there were no interaction effects between humor and ethos. This lack of interaction might be a function of the small actual difference between authoritativeness ratings and the total lack of difference in ratings of character.

Of Interest. Two not-quite significant results may be useful for humor researchers and might stimulate further experimentation. First, although the summed character score means were not significantly affected by the use of humor, the difference was in the "correct" direction of favoring the humor-user, as previous research has indicated. The humorous speakers were rated at 5.15 and the nonhumorous at 4.96 ($F = 1.575$, $p < .213$). And, in addition to the analyses of the summed scores of the ethos scales, the 2 x 2 analyses were run on each individual scale. On the "Dishonest/honest" scale the humorous speakers were rated more honest, 5.62 to 5.16 ($F = 3.838$, $p < .053$).

Discussion

It would appear that the advice by textbook writers that the speaker should include mildly self-disparaging humor is sound. Apparently speakers of moderate to moderately high ethos can enhance their audience's perceptions of their "sense of humor" and their "wittiness" (and, maybe even their honesty) with such humor without endangering other, more serious aspects of their "images." Left unknown is what effect such humor would have in the case of a speaker with initial ethos so low as to be considered negative.

Footnotes

[1]Most of these are summarized in Charles R. Gruner, Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor (Chicago: The Nelson-Hall Co., 1978).

[2]Waldo W. Braden, Public Speaking: The Essentials (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 161-3.

[3]Carl H. Weaver, Speaking in Public (New York: American Book Co., 1966), p. 236.

[4]Holly Stocking and Dolf Zillman, "Effects of Humorous Disparagement of Self, Friend, and Enemy," Psychological Reports, 39 (1976), 455-61.

[5]Mei-Jung Chang and Charles R. Gruner, "Audience Reaction to Self-Disparaging Humor," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 46 (Summer, 1981), 419-26.

[6]James C. McCroskey, "Scales for the Measurement of Ethos," Speech Monographs, 33 (1966), 65-72.

[7]A copy of the stimuli and the response measures may be obtained by writing the author.